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Why we count: There's a lot at stake in census

An important congressional seat and millions in federal aid hinge on Minnesota's turnout

By MaryJo Webster
mwebster@pioneerpress.com

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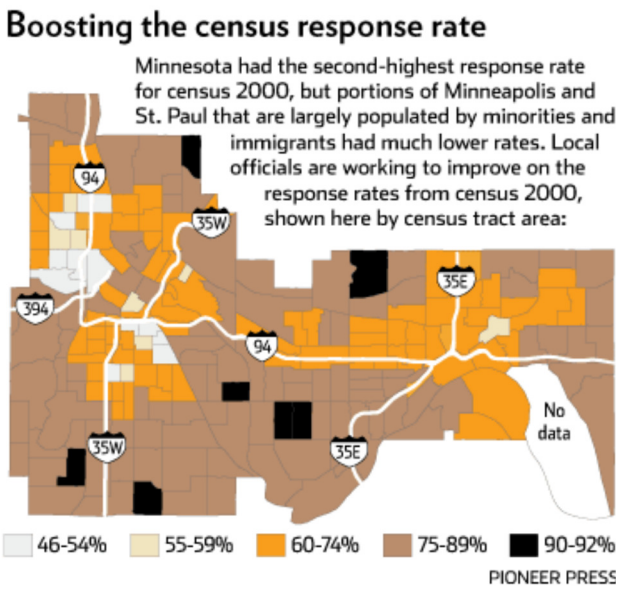

Never before has the government pushed so hard to count every man, woman and child in the country.

The U.S. Census Bureau has launched an unprecedented $340 million campaign to encourage participation in the 2010 count of an estimated 308 million people. Nationwide, neighborhood groups, cities and counties are doling out buttons, pencils and seat cushions — proclaiming "It's in our hands!" — to remind people to fill out their forms.

In Minnesota, the campaignhas ramped into overdrive, because the stakes are so high. The state is on the verge of losing a congressional seat based on Census figures.

In fact, whether or not the state loses a seat — and the power that goes along with it — could come down to 1,000 people. In the last census, Minnesota had a 75 percent response rate — the second highest in the nation. But state officials say a similar turnout might not be enough to prove the true count and keep our eighth congressional seat.

That's why local governments have partnered with more than 2,000 community groups — churches, minority organizations and businesses — to encourage participation, debunk fears about how the data will be used and educate people about why everyone should fill out the 10-question form.

The groups are especially targeting neighborhoods dubbed "hard to count," where compliance was low in the past and where the population is often made up of immigrants or low-income people.

While the official purpose of the decennial census is to determine representation in Congress, there's more at stake. Cities, counties and school districts receive federal money based on what the census data say about how many people live in their areas and what their economic circumstances are.

In turn, local governments use the money to do a

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variety of things, such as run programs for the poor, build roads and bridges, and provide grants for community development.

"For every person who is not counted, we stand to lose $1,000 per year in funds from the federal government," said Luz Maria Frias, the city of St. Paul's director of human rights and equal economic opportunity department. "Over the decennial period, that would be $10,000 per person."

Counting the millions of people in the United States is a daunting task that the federal government has attempted every 10 years since 1790. Over time, the methods have changed, but this year's questions are basically the same as the ones asked in the first census.

This year, however, will mark the first time in six decades that every household will get the same form. In previous censuses, there was a short form and a long form. A random sample of about one in six households got the long form, which contained 53 questions for each person, while all the others got the short form.

The long form has been replaced by an annual survey called the American Community Survey, which is also conducted by the U.S. Census Bureau. It asks more-detailed questions, delving into topics such as family structure, occupation, commuting, veteran status and how many vehicles a person owns.

The U.S. Census Bureau is touting the change in its marketing blitz, noting "it's just 10 questions" and it will "only take 10 minutes."

"If you've filled out an application for a health club membership, you've given out more private information than you will in the 2010 census," U.S. Census Bureau employee Ryan Dolan told a group at a census informational meeting in St. Paul in January.

Despite that, Ryan and others say getting every household to fill out the form is challenging. Some fear the government and don't want to share any information. Others worry their landlords might find out they have more people living in a rental unit than they should. Illegal immigrants are afraid information will be given to the immigration service.

Census Bureau employees who see the information on the form aren't allowed to share it with any other government entity, including the immigration service, said Jeff Schneider, a city of Minneapolis employee and a member of the city's complete count committee.

But fears persist. "Tell that to Somalis who came from a place without a functioning government, or young black people who are not connected to the mainstream economy," he said.

The 2000 census was the first time the U.S. Census Bureau paid for advertising to encourage people to participate. The $100,000 spent resulted in a $305 million savings because they didn't need to spend as much money having census takers knock on doors of households that didn't mail back the forms.

This year, the bureau's $133 million ad campaign, translated into 28 languages, aims to increase the 67 percent response rate from the last census. That's part of the larger, $340 million publicity campaign that includes school programs, a traveling road show of census buses, and the partnerships with groups that give away trinkets and posters.

Nationally, there are more than 200,000 of these

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partner groups. In Minnesota, there are about 2,000 that are largely focusing their energies on the hard-to-count areas.

The Census Bureau has identified pockets within each community where response rates in past censuses were low or where they expect to find households with immigrants, low-income people and others who are less likely to fill out the form.

Groups and businesses that provide services to the Asian community are among those that have banded together to encourage participation.

One task is to help Hmong, Karen, Burmese and other Asians who have recently arrived in Minnesota and have not experienced a census.

"There are a lot of fears and barriers that we need to overcome," said Bao Vang, director of the Hmong American Partnership. "If they don't understand what the information is being used for and how that's going to benefit their community, they're going to be less willing to share that information."

The Minnesota Civic Engagement Table, a coalition of nonprofit groups, is working with local minority groups, labor unions, mosques and churches to encourage participation.

"We know our communities best and can put this message in front of them in a more convincing way," said Maureen Ramirez, director of the Minnesota Civil Engagement Table.

Ramirez said her group is gathering volunteers who will go door to door March 28 in some St. Paul and Minneapolis hard-to-count neighborhoods to make sure people have sent back the forms.

"We want the best picture of our neighborhoods that we can get," Ramirez said.

MaryJo Webster can be reached at 651-228-5507.

ABOUT THE 2010 CENSUS

The U.S. Census Bureau is required by the Constitution to count every person in the United States every 10 years. Each household is asked to fill out a 10-question form indicating the number of people who live there — including name, age, date of birth, gender, race and Hispanic origin — and the household's income level and whether the occupants rent or own. Forms should be returned in the prepaid envelope by April 1. After that, census workers will visit any households that haven't responded. Forms are available in six languages, large print and Braille, and there are assistance guides available in 59 languages.

HOW THE CENSUS WILL REACH YOU

If you get mail delivery: Forms will arrive in the mail the week of March 14.

If you don't have home mail delivery: Census workers will hand deliver the form or leave it on your doorstep in a plastic bag. It should have arrived last week.

If you live in a group facility (nursing home, college dorm, prison, etc.): A census worker will visit the facility to gather information for the forms.

If you live here part time (college students, snowbirds, etc): You should fill out the form in the location where you spend the largest portion of the year.

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HOW CONGRESSIONAL SEATS ARE DECIDED

The 440 seats in the U.S. House are assigned to the states based on population. Each state gets one seat, then seats 51 through 440 are apportioned based on a complicated formula using the decennial population counts. How many seats each state gets is based on its population relative to the other states.

This won't be determined until the Census Bureau submits census results to Congress at the end of the year.

Minnesota state demographer Tom Gillaspy did a preliminary analysis in December using July 2009 state population estimates and found that Minnesota could "just barely" lose its eighth seat, but he noted that the ranking for which state gets the last seat is so close that he's not confident of the result.

Minnesota's track record of getting high participation in filling out the census forms could be a deciding factor.

Apportionment by population, which has been done since the 14th Amendment was passed in 1868, has resulted in the three most-populous states — California, Texas and New York — holding one-quarter of the U.S. House seats.

Those larger delegations have more sway in committees and other behind-the-scenes action at the U.S. Capitol than states such as Minnesota, says Steve Smith, a congressional scholar and director of the Weidenbaum Center on the Economy, Government and Public Policy at Washington University in St. Louis.

Losing a seat would mean Minnesota would have less representation on House committees, putting the state at an ever greater disadvantage, Smith says.

"It's a matter of having a voice," says Smith, who lives in Blaine. "It's more than simply having a vote on these committees. Oftentimes the wheeling and dealing behind the scenes that we never see involves more than one committee. If Minnesota is not represented on a committee, Minnesota's interests can easily get cut out."